

# Making Money in the Margins of War. An International Weapons Smuggling Case during the Indonesian War of Independence, 1948-1949

Maarten Manse

Weapons are an essential element in warfare. But not all parties in armed conflicts have easy access to the legal gun market or sufficient financial resources, as was the case for the forces of the newly proclaimed Indonesian Republic during the Indonesian war of Independence (1945-1949). This colonial war is historically infamous for its extreme violent chapters of guerilla and counter-guerrilla tactics, and its political sensitivity and multisided perspectives, which this article cannot escape to reflect upon as well.<sup>1</sup> Weapons are inevitably an important source of violence, but surprisingly absent as a topic of research in historiography about this war. This article exemplifies how the Indonesian Republic could get its hands on weapons, venturing on the thin, controversial line between trade and smuggling at the final stage of the war.

In 1945, many Japanese weapons, varying from small guns to fighter aircrafts, were distributed among Indonesian police forces and passed on to Republican fighters, yet still the Indonesian Republican Army was short on weapons when the war started.<sup>2</sup> However, other methods were found in acquiring weapons from the Dutch colonial army, by either theft or purchase from collaborating and corrupted colonial soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, the Republic assembled its armory by purchasing weapons abroad. Singapore and the Philippines provided solid markets outside Dutch

---

<sup>1</sup> B. Luttikhuis and D.A. Moses, 'Introduction. Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence: the Dutch empire in Indonesia' in: idem ed., *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence: the Dutch Empire in Indonesia* (London and New York, NY 2014) 1-24: 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> W.G.J. Rummelink, 'The Emergence of the New Situation: The Japanese Army on Java After the Surrender', *Kabar Seberang: Sulating Maphilindo* 4 (1978) 57-74: 60; B. Bouman, "'Operatie Mariam Bee'. Een gelaagde Republikeinse wapensmokkelactie vanuit Singapore in 1946' in: J.Th. Lindblad, W. van der Molen and C. Fasseur ed., *Macht en majesteit opstellen voor Cees Fasseur bij zijn afscheid als hoogleraar in de geschiedenis van Indonesië aan de Universiteit Leiden* (Leiden 2002) 116-131: 116-117.

<sup>3</sup> Bouman, "'Operatie Mariam Bee'", 117-118. According to Bouman, Tegal was the center of arms smuggling.

colonial waters but within the sight of Dutch colonial authorities.<sup>4</sup> In Dutch eyes, the latter was smuggling. Indeed, these weapon purchases happened in a shadow economy of unknown proportions that comprised of sincere revolutionaries, corrupt government officials, bona-fide businessmen, experienced criminals and everything in between.<sup>5</sup> Little has been published about weapons and weapons trade in the history of this war. The topic touches upon many questions around colonial violence and the legitimacy of colonial rule.<sup>6</sup>

As pointed out by professor Eric Tagliacozzo, smuggling across the porous borders between especially the Dutch and British Southeast Asian colonies, either as continuation of 'age-old commodity lines only designated now as contraband by area governments', or as opportunities to make money from changing political circumstances, historically interacted with larger structures of society.<sup>7</sup> Smuggling may have been a profitable scheme of resistance of local peoples against the expanding reach and technological power of colonial states. In addition, the dynamics of state making and solidification of borders by colonial regimes that tried to control trade in all of its aspects, created opportunities for criminals and encouraged smuggling.<sup>8</sup> As Tagliacozzo argues, this was specifically the case with weapons trade, which knew a long tradition in Southeast Asia and seemed hard to control.<sup>9</sup> When the Dutch and British colonial regimes realized how

---

<sup>4</sup> H. Wagner, 'Where did the Weapons Come From?', *Kabar Seberang: Sulating Maphilindo* 19-20 (1988) 118-132: 119-122.

<sup>5</sup> 'Illegal', being defined by the adversary (in this case the Dutch colonial government), is of course a questionable term in the context of the Indonesian War of Independence, or any topic in which the legitimacy of colonial rule itself is at stake.

<sup>6</sup> An illuminating exception is the article of Ben Bouman (mentioned above), about a smuggling affair in 1946 that preludes the case I deal with. Bouman bases his article chiefly on interviews he held with the main smugglers, who, after the war, entered Indonesia's diplomatic service and later migrated to the Netherlands. See for enthralling tales of smuggle between Java and Singapore the essays (in Indonesian) in: K. Mochtar ed., *Memoar Pejuang Republik Indonesia Seputar "Zaman Singapura", 1945-1950* [*Indonesian Soldiers' memories of the "Age of Singapore", 1945-1950*] (Jakarta 1992).

<sup>7</sup> E. Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders. Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (New Haven, CT and London) 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 297, 363, 373.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 290-294.

uncontained arms trade in Southeast Asia was, they ‘thought better of selling weapons indiscriminately.’<sup>10</sup> Yet, new boundaries were new opportunities for profit. The traffic of weapons enlarged as the events of World War I and II transited arms flows not only across but also through Southeast Asia, reaching a dramatic climax during the war years.<sup>11</sup> Short on weapons supplies, the Indonesian Revolutionary Army started sending out ‘businessmen’ and ‘merchants’ to Singapore, at the time the largest allied weapons depot in Southeast Asia. Here, Chinese and Malay businessmen, driven by anti-colonial sentiment and assisted by corrupted British and Dutch army officers, supplied large storages of cheap weapons. From 1947 onward the Dutch naval blockade around Java’s northeastern coast forced smugglers to apply alternative strategies, using speedboats and airplanes, the latter increasingly flown by allied war pilots, while the center of smuggling partly shifted to Malaysia and Thailand.<sup>12</sup> From 1947 onward, there is an increase of reports of unregistered (‘illegal’) flights carried out by ad-hoc established airline corporations.<sup>13</sup>

I will highlight one specific, brilliant and filmic weapon deal, documented in the archives of the Attorney General of the Dutch East Indies, 1945-1950.<sup>14</sup> In the late summer of 1948, a group of illustrious British and American ex-naval officers and Indonesian rebels arranged a rendezvous for an enormous weapon deal on a small island in the Riau archipelago, using speedboats and an amphibious aircraft. Though they were ambushed and captured by Singaporean and Dutch colonial police forces, their story indicates the existence of a large and quite professional circle of opium and weapons smugglers. Investigating this thrilling case, known as the ‘Airabu affair’, helps us to initiate in clarifying the connectivity, width, impact, and meaning of smuggling in Indonesia and the surrounding

---

<sup>10</sup> Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*, 309.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 1945-1954 (hereafter: NA, BZ), inv. nr. 9969. Also accessible online via: <http://www.hdekker.info/DIVERSEN/NEI47-49.htm>, accessed 15 June 2016. Well recorded are the flights of various Dakota’s, Catalina’s and other airplanes of Siamese Airways, P.O.A.S. (Pacific Overseas Airline Limited) T.A.A.S. (Trans Asiatic Air Services Siam) directed by John Coast and R.R. Copley, mainly to and from Yogyakarta to various places in South and Southeast Asia.

<sup>14</sup> Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, procureur-generaal bij het Hooggerechtshof van Nederlands-Indië, 1945-1950 (hereafter: NA, PG).

parts of Southeast Asia during the war years. Barely researched, smuggling proves a promising topic to explore the war economy of specifically the Indonesian war of Independence, but probably many other wars as well, putting colonialism and colonial warfare in all its guises in a wider perspective.

### **The Airabu affair: prolusion**

In the late afternoon of Monday 13 September 1948, a small motorboat, named 'Gladys Mary', entered the bay of a tiny, uninhabited tropical island known as Airabu (literally: 'grey water'), which is part of the Anambas Archipelago in the Riau Islands.<sup>15</sup> This small archipelago is located about 280 kilometers northeast of Singapore. Little is known of its history. During the occupation of the Riau by the Japanese 25<sup>th</sup> army, the sparsely populated islands were likely overlooked.<sup>16</sup> However, the arrival of the Gladys Mary would trigger a chain of events that would draw these tranquil islands into the spotlight of public attention in the Dutch East Indies, Singapore, and the USA.

On board were the captain of the ship, an assistant named 'Junus', an Australian woman as the boat's cook and Carlton A. Hire, a former British naval officer who lived in Singapore.<sup>17</sup> Together with a Singaporean businessman, Caesar Houghton, Hire had set up a meeting for a huge weapon deal in the Airabu bay with potential buyers from the Sumatran branch of anticolonial resistance. But what Hire did not know, was that these buyers as well as this illustrious Caesar Houghton were not who they claimed they were.

---

<sup>15</sup> Currently the island is also known as *Pulau Kiabu*, and is still uninhabited.

<sup>16</sup> Nowadays the islands are chiefly mentioned in relation to diving tourism and vast exploitation of oil and gas reserves, triggering population growth. See: E. Macguire, 'Asia's top five tropical island paradises', <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/13/sport/south-east-asia-sailing/index.html>, accessed 19 April 2016; M. Aritonang and W. Ajistyatama, 'Anambas blessed with abundant resources'. [Http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/02/17/natuna-anambas-blessed-with-abundant-resources.html](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/02/17/natuna-anambas-blessed-with-abundant-resources.html), accessed 19 April 2016.

<sup>17</sup> For a full overview of the main characters who appear in this article, see the scheme in appendix 1. For the sake of clarity, some persons of lesser importance are left out.



Fig. 1: Carlton Hire. Source: S.A., 'Airabu Arms Men Appeal', *The Straits Times*, 21 January 1949, 1 (in NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 III).

The weapon deal had cost months of preparation, and involved numerous persons in various smuggling networks all over Southeast Asia. I will give a short description of these networks first, to keep the story uncluttered and emphasize the enormous scale of smuggling in the late 1940s in this region. On top of a tangled cluster of smugglers we find a select group of corrupt American and Pilipino businessmen and army officials. They were the prime operators of opium and weapons smuggling in Southeast Asia at the time. In early 1948, Hire came into contact with Martin H. Tinio, son of the youngest general in the Philippine Revolutionary Army, Manuel Tinio. Martin Tinio possessed a small aviation enterprise and had caught the attention of Singaporean and Dutch colonial police and intelligence services, for he managed an expanding network of former RAF-pilots who performed unregistered and therefore illegal flights

from Manilla to Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia.<sup>18</sup> Until then, however, the Dutch had not been able to catch Tinio or any of his pilots or associates red handed. Hire, who had met Tinio in April 1948, became one of Tinio's agents in Singapore.

In July of the same year, Hire had an appointment in Bangkok with a relative of Tinio, 'Captain' Jimmy E. Johnston, an American captain of a merchant vessel with whom he had been in contact for about a month. The 'Captain' offered Hire 2,000 Browning Rifles and gave him a list of weapon supplies in Manilla, provided by him and Tinio. These weapons were to be transported by Johnston to Bangkok, where he instructed Hire to sell them to Siamese communists who would pay with gold from a bank robbery and stolen from K.L.M. airplanes.<sup>19</sup> The deal however was a failure. Allegedly, Dutch police officers were able to trace and reclaim the stolen gold. On top of that, Johnston and Tinio were not able to provide their pilots with sufficient fuel needed for the journey back to Singapore.<sup>20</sup> Johnston claimed he stored the weapons in a cave on Airabu. This was the last thing Hire ever heard from Johnston. Back in Singapore, he decided to send one of Tinio's pilots to 'interview the Far East Representative' (Johnston), but he was untraceable, and the weapons were never found.<sup>21</sup> From information in contemporary newspapers and the archival material in the National Archives in The Hague, it becomes clear Johnston must have smelled trouble.<sup>22</sup> He rightfully did.

---

<sup>18</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 part I (inv. nr. 186 consists of five parts, numbered with Roman numerals), herein: 'Proces verbaal tegen Hire, 18 sept 1948, door J.W.J. de Haas'.

<sup>19</sup> S.A., 'Stolen Gold for Arms Payment', *The Straits Times*, 26 January 1949, 1.

<sup>20</sup> The combined weight of weapons and fuel on the outbound journey from Manilla to Airabu would completely drain the tanks. S.A., 'Stolen Gold for Arms Payment', *The Straits Times*, 26 January 1949, 1.

<sup>21</sup> S.A., 'Miljoenen wapendump nabij Aer Aboe onvindbaar', *Het Dagblad*, 28 January 1949, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem; NA PG, inv. nr. 186 I, "Proces verbaal tegen Hire, 18 sept 1948, door J.W.J. de Haas".

### **The thin line between opium and weapons smuggle**

During the summer of 1948, Hire's movements had been traced by the so-called 'Secretary of Special Services' Sybrand van Hulst, who was stationed at the Dutch consulate in Singapore. When civil administration over the Riau islands was returned from Singapore to Tanjung Pinang in 1946, the local governor advised to maintain an intelligence branch at the consulate in cooperation with the Netherlands Indies Intelligence Force (NEFIS). The governor heavily protested when in 1947 the Dutch government planned to abolish the post. He claimed that Singapore 'was a center of Indonesian nationalist political activity and international trade by the republicans, closely intertwined with its political objectives'.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Van Hulst was sent to Singapore by direct order of Attorney-General H.W. Felderhof, to whom Van Hulst frequently reported. An immense stream of intelligence correspondence followed. Van Hulst reflected weekly on matters ranging far beyond Singapore and the Riau archipelago, such as international trade and smuggling, political developments in Singapore, the activities and publications of the 'Indonesia Office' (the Republican department in Singapore), and encroaching Chinese communism in the region.

In 1948, Van Hulst followed Hire and Johnston to Bangkok to investigate their activities, and came to the conclusion that:

for the last two months, with irregular intervals, flights are being performed between Java's southern coast, Singora [Thailand, ed.], Singapore and a place somewhere near Malacca, using a 'Catalina' flying boat owned by Martin Tinio.<sup>24</sup>

These flights happened right under the nose of – and likely with knowledge of some – (colonial) officials and police forces. The principal commodity was opium. But it was rumored that during the last flight (in early august 1948), there had been weapons aboard as well. The pilot of this flight, Raymond Coombs (ex-RAF), was questioned by Van Hulst, as he was

---

<sup>23</sup> Note that the governor speaks of 'trade' instead of 'smuggling'. NA, PG, inv. nr. 215, 'Brief van de PG aan de directeur Binnenlands Bestuur, 31 januari 1947, no 460/A3'.

<sup>24</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Brief van S. van Hulst aan PG, Singapore, 19 juni 1948'.

known to be in touch with Tinio and Hire.<sup>25</sup> Coombs' report shows there was a paper thin line between weapon and drug trafficking, and, moreover, that it was their investigation of opium smuggling that led the Dutch police to the weapon deal at Airabu.

Large amounts of opium, stored at various locations on Java, were being distributed by a network of Republican Indonesian officials and Australian and American pilots to Malacca and Singapore, where it was sold for hefty sums.<sup>26</sup> The opium trade has played a prominent role in Southeast Asian history. In Indonesia, opium was formally sold under regulations of the Dutch government. Up until about 1895, Chinese revenue farmers were allowed to produce and sell opium under contracts with the colonial government. But from a Dutch point of view, an increasingly wealthy and powerful Chinese opium farming class started to influence local economies and societies, endangering both the wellbeing of the indigenous population and undermining the power of the colonial government.<sup>27</sup> Opium production was therefore nationalized and monopolized by the Dutch colonial state between 1895 and 1915 under the so-called 'Opium and Salt Administration' (Opium- en Zoutregie; introduced in 1903). Although, in line with international agreements, opium production was to be diminished, it continued to be a substantial part of government revenue and therefore opium policy was never as strict in practice as it was on paper. The opium trade had always been the most lucrative product within the revenue farming system and had provided a steady financial supply under both the revenue farming and state monopoly system. Therefore it was unattractive to the Dutch government to keep opium production low and under control.<sup>28</sup> Dutch anti-opium campaigns in the colony may suggest that the colonial state attempted to achieve limitation of opium consumption in the twentieth century, but this has been typed a 'legal hypocrisy'. In reality,

---

<sup>25</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Verklaring van Raymond Coombs, 25-28 September 1948'.

<sup>26</sup> Though it is unclear if Dutch colonial officials were involved in this network as well, these were also active in opium smuggling.

<sup>27</sup> A. Wahid, *From Revenue Farming to State Monopoly. The Political Economy of Taxation in Colonial Indonesia, Java c. 1816-1942* (Utrecht 2013) 76-80, 122-129, 138-139.

<sup>28</sup> Wahid, *From Revenue Farming to State Monopoly*, 4, 75.



opium profits reached numbers into millions, often a thousand times more than official Dutch anti-opium campaign budgets.<sup>29</sup>

After the Japanese surrendered and the Dutch re-occupied the Dutch East Indies, the Opium Administration was reinstated, but in the chaos of war it appeared even harder to regulate the substance. Many corrupt Dutch and Indonesian officials set up their own opium trading networks.<sup>30</sup> In 1948 for example, the Indonesian minister of finance Alexander Andries Maramis was accused of involvement in unregistered opium transport to Singapore, by 'abusing his position in the Committee of Good Offices.'<sup>31</sup> Another important official, the illustrious 'Dr. Oetoyo', was suspected of having earned at least 102,000 Malayan dollars (M\$) from opium import to Singapore, where he was head of the Indonesia Office.<sup>32</sup> The spider in the

---

<sup>29</sup> H. Derks, *History of the Opium Problem. the Assault on the East, ca. 1600-1950* (Leiden and Boston, MA 2012) 348; Wahid, *From Revenue Farming to State Monopoly*, 126-129.

<sup>30</sup> Derks, *History of the Opium Problem*, 348-54, 369-372; E. Vanvugt, *Wettig opium. 350 jaar Nederlandse opiumhandel in de Indische archipel* (Haarlem 1985) 340-354, 362-375. The cooperation of collaborating state officials was often crucial to the success of contraband undertakings. See: Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> NA, PG, inv. n.r. 187, 'Rapport Regeringsvoorlichtingsdienst a.n. 1658, 16 augustus 1948'. The 'Committee of Good Offices' (Committee van Goede Diensten) was established under pressure of the UN after the Renville-Agreement of 1948, and consisted of a Belgian representative, appointed by the Netherlands, an Australian representative, appointed by Indonesia and an American representative.

<sup>32</sup> NA, PG, inv. n.r. 187, 'Centraal opsporingsblad no. 29, 29 Juli 1949. Signalering v. Personen'; inv. n.r. 188, 'Verklaring van Moekarto (alias Sowigno), "Financial coordinator of Republic of Indonesia for South East Asia and Australia." 2-4 oktober 1948'. Oetoyo was no doctor, but had been in the Netherlands to study, and earned the title 'drs.' (equivalent to a Master degree). This might have confused the British authorities in Singapore, who changed 'drs' into 'dr.', which Oetoyo eagerly copied. He was quite a noteworthy figure in Singapore during the war years, living a remarkably wealthy life (likely funded by opium trade). Leading the Indonesia Office, he fought a lengthy propaganda-war with the Dutch Embassy in Singapore. He was dosely involved in the operation of the P.O.A.S. and associated with carrier flights out by well-known smugglers such as John Coast and R.R. Cobley (See: NA, BZ, inv. n.r. 9969, herein: '24.05.1948' and '12.03.1949'.) See also: *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic.: 1848 - 1957), July 14 1950, 2., 'Personality Oetoyo: an agent of friendship'; *The Singapore Free Press*, 25 August 1948, 1, 'Opium racket: Dr. Oetoyo says "no knowledge"'. It is not entirely clear if Van Hulst, who wrote several reports on Oetoyo, means American or Malayan dollars. In purchasing

web was Tony Wen, a Chinese-Indonesian sports instructor and semi-professional soccer player.<sup>33</sup> Wen, who was suspected of Communist sympathies, had founded an ‘international brigade’ during the first Dutch military operation in 1947, that according to Dutch sources functioned as a kind of Chinese foreign legion. He also held ‘seditious speeches’ for Radio Yogya and was infamous among Dutch officials for his strong anticolonial attitude.<sup>34</sup>

---

power parity, 102,000 M\$ would nowadays equal at least 500,000 euros, or 860,000 euros if Van Hulst means American dollars. This is calculated as follows: The value of the M\$ was set as £1.00 = M\$8.6. (For the historical value of the Malayan dollar, see: A. V. M. Horton, “‘So Rich as to Be Almost Indecent’: Some Aspects of Post-War Rehabilitation in Brunei, 1946-1953”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 58.1 (1995) 91-103: 91.) 102,000 M\$ would thus equal roughly £11,860 in 1948. The real price or commodity value of that amount would be about £388,900, or roughly €500,000. However, expressed in income wealth or labor value the amount would be even higher, up to roughly €1,9 million. For the historic value of the USD and GBP, see: [https://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/relativevalue.php?use\[\]=CPI&use\[\]=NOMINALEARN&year\\_early=1948&pound71=11860&shilling71=&pence71=&amount=11860&year\\_source=1948&year\\_result=2016](https://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/relativevalue.php?use[]=CPI&use[]=NOMINALEARN&year_early=1948&pound71=11860&shilling71=&pence71=&amount=11860&year_source=1948&year_result=2016), accessed 1 June 2016.

In this article following amounts of money, expressed in today’s PPP, are calculated based on the above described method, based on the real price value.

<sup>33</sup> He was also known as Boen Kin To or Wen Chin[g] Tao. NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, ‘Centraal opsporingsblad no.29 29 jul. 1949. Signalering v. Personen.’; inv. nr. 188 ‘File Tony Wen’; inv. nr 904, ‘Tony Wen’.

<sup>34</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 187, ‘Centraal opsporingsblad no.29 29 jul. 1949. Signalering v. Personen: Tony Wen’, ‘Brief van S. van Hulst aan PG, Singapore, 19 juni 1948’.



Fig. 2: Tony Wen. Source: NA, PG, inv. nr. 188, 'File Tony Wen'.

In August 1948, Wen was aboard the flight operated by Coombs, from Bangkok to Karimun Island to the south of Singapore. There he arranged for the appropriate aeronautical maps with his brother, who sold the opium on the streets of Singapore. They continued to a lake near Kediri in East Java, to pick up opium and other contraband, supposedly weapons.<sup>35</sup> After flying back to Karimun, Coombs returned to Bangkok and claimed to have received 13,000 M\$ for this single trip.<sup>36</sup> He made two more flights, earning similar amounts of money, but by then Van Hulst had gotten wind of the opium smugglers. Two days before the weapon deal at

---

<sup>35</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Verklaring van Raymond Coombs, 25-28 September 1948'.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem; in PPP nowadays about 64,500 euros.

Airabu went down, Wen and Coombs were arrested in Singapore.<sup>37</sup> Two weeks later, Wen was released for lack of evidence and fled to China.<sup>38</sup>

The opium smuggling network appeared to be well organized. According to Van Hulst, it was facilitated on Java by Moekarto Notowidigdo, head of the Republican department of the Opium and Salt Administration, who was arrested in September 1948. After interrogating Coombs, Van Hulst discerned a direct link between opium and arms smuggling, and surmised that weapons were either exchanged for opium or paid for with money earned with opium sales in Singapore. An informant of Van Hulst eavesdropped on Wen in Kuala Lumpur in June 1948, where he spoke with members of the Malayan Communist Party about possibly supplying weapons to communist rebels on Sumatra and Java, financed with opium money.<sup>39</sup> But this conversation was insufficient evidence to prove that the network around Hire and Tinio was in possession of opium, or that Wen was in possession of weapons. The link between weapons and opium smuggling was chiefly proven by the use of the same airplanes, integration of various small airline companies and interaction between the 'main culprits.'<sup>40</sup> It was estimated that at least 2 tons of opium were smuggled by the Catalina aircraft from East Java to Singapore via Karimun and other small islands along with various commodities, stolen goods, and weapons, shipped from Singapore to Thailand, totaling a value of about 24 million(!) US dollars.<sup>41</sup> As the Dutch knew from experience, opium trade was extraordinary profitable. Obviously the Dutch, who claimed a state monopoly on the distribution of opium, labeled transportation of opium outside of the Dutch East Indies by third parties as smuggling, and considered massive commerce in illegal opium therefore a highly dangerous threat to their revenue and power.<sup>42</sup> Both Dutch and Republican

---

<sup>37</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 188, 'File Tony Wen'; inv. nr. 187.

<sup>38</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 187; Yong Mun Cheong, *The Indonesian Revolution and the Singapore Connection, 1945-1949* (Leiden 2003) 132.

<sup>39</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 187, 'Brief van S. van Hulst aan PG, Singapore, 19 juni 1948'.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem; NA, BZ, 9969.

<sup>41</sup> That would be about an astonishing 360 million dollars nowadays. NA, PG, inv. nr. 187, 'Brief van S. van Hulst aan PG, Singapore, 19 juni 1948.'; Bouman, "'Operatie Mariam Bee'", 117.

<sup>42</sup> Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*, 7.

Indonesians continuously questioned the legality of each other's actions.<sup>43</sup> Both claimed the other side was wrong and evil, and pointed to individuals on the other side that abused their powers and resources for personal benefit. Sinister businessmen and corrupt officials like Dr. Oetoyo and Moekarto Notowidigdo lived expensively on opium revenues, as Dutch state opium patrons had done before, in their case accorded with the corresponding but self-made laws.

### **The deal was no deal: an adventure derailed**

The failed deal with 'Captain' Johnston made Hire realize how profitable arms smuggling was. While looking for another buyer, he was contacted by Caesar Houghton. Houghton placed a huge weapons order worth \$60,000 and also solved the fuel problem by arranging an extra fuel transport by boat.<sup>44</sup> He claimed he intended to buy the weapons in cooperation with a group of Indonesian revolutionaries from Sumatra, who agreed on taking extra fuel to the deal in return.<sup>45</sup> Hire approached Tinio and discovered the weapons Johnston had promised were still in Manilla. Without hesitating Hire prepared the deal. An American pilot and business partner of Tinio, Albert William Onstott, agreed to fly the Catalina with a selected crew of fellow American pilots to Manilla, pick up the weapons, and head for Airabu. There they planned to assemble with Hire and Houghton and the Indonesian revolutionaries. The deal is described in a report written by Houghton, that 'reads like a big thriller.'<sup>46</sup> On Monday afternoon, thirteenth of August 1948, Hire spotted the rebels' boat, which had been there since the previous day. Relieved that they had made it, Hire cheerfully met Houghton's buyers, exclaiming 'Merdeka!' (Freedom!), a popular Indonesian salute. The rebels' headman shouted back: 'Merdeka tetap!' (freedom forever!), and confirmed that they had brought 800 gallons of fuel for the return flight of the airplane on their boat. That evening, Hire and Roberts

---

<sup>43</sup> The Dutch Consulate and Indonesia Office in Singapore fought quite a propaganda war by publishing articles in Dutch colonial newspapers and in the 'Bulletin of the Indonesia Office'.

<sup>44</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Verslag S.v.D. van Hulst, 26 december 48'.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>46</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Rapporten over Houghton', 'Brief van S. van Hulst aan PG, Singapore, 8 januari 1949'.

entertained themselves with their Australian cook. Meanwhile, Houghton and his assistant, Junus, stayed on the speedboat of the headman.<sup>47</sup> They had very different views on what would happen the next day.



Fig. 3: The Catalina (registration number P.I.C.-224), used by the American pilots in the Airabu affair. Source: S.A., unknown article, *The Morning Tribune*, 2 December 1948, 9 (in NA, PG, 186 III).

The following morning, around eleven o'clock, the Catalina made a low pass over the bay and landed at Hire's signal. Onstott and his pilots, stepped out and anchored the plane. Five cases with weapons were carried out of the plane and loaded onto the rebels' boat. The situation soon took an unexpected turn; Hire and the American pilots insisted on checking the fuel cans in the ships' cargo hold. Hire and Onstott entered the hold, Hire lifted one of the can's covers, and saw seawater. At the same time, the 'headman' blew his whistle, pulled out a gun and shouted 'hands up!'<sup>48</sup> Hire found himself surrounded by an overwhelming group of Singaporean and

---

<sup>47</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Verslag S.v.D. van Hulst, 26 december 48'.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem; NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 Part II, 'Voorlopig onderzoek inzake internationale wapensmokkel Air Aboe'.

Dutch police forces. The ‘headman’ was actually police inspector first class J.W.J. de Haas, selected for this mission by Van Hulst for his Indonesian looks. Junus worked for the Singaporean police, and Houghton was their prime informant.<sup>49</sup>

Van Hulst had planned this intervention since he had followed Hire to Bangkok in July 1948. He recruited Houghton once he got back to Singapore, who agreed to play an undercover role as ‘pseudo buyer’. In return he received a reward of 5,000 Malayan dollars.<sup>50</sup> According to Van Hulst, he fulfilled his role ‘magnificently, with lots of fantasy and courage (...) misleading both the ‘Hire-ring’ as well as the ‘American-Filipino ring’ of Capt. Johnson-Onstott-Murray-Martin Tinio.’<sup>51</sup> Van Hulst realized that the smugglers were continuously ahead of him, and therefore decided to set up a deal himself.<sup>52</sup> Though he had merely hoped to prove the connection between arms and opium smuggling, he was more than satisfied to have caught most of the smugglers on his radar. There was little time and room for preparation, and he was lucky that Houghton knew how to play his part. When Houghton contacted Hire, he subtly hinted that Wen’s network was nearing its end under pressure of the police, so Hire would feel the urgency to speed up.<sup>53</sup> Hire quickly made the arrangements, while Van Hulst ordered De Haas to assemble a team. De Haas chartered a British Navy speedboat, and assisted by two superintendents of the Singaporean Criminal Investigation Department and five British Naval Police officers, he sailed to Airabu. In the evening of Monday the thirteenth, De Haas, Houghton and Junus made plans to arrest Hire and the American pilots in the cabin of the boat, so the actual intervention in the cargo hold was not part of the plan and largely improvisation.

In no time Hire and his crew were overpowered and arrested. The airplane was searched, and on board De Haas found 40 cases with 2,000

---

<sup>49</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 Part II, ‘Voorlopig onderzoek’.

<sup>50</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, ‘Brief van S. van Hulst aan “The Commissioner of Police Singapore”, 3 december 1948’; nowadays about 25,000 euros in PPP.

<sup>51</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, ‘Rapporten over Houghton’, ‘Brief van S. van Hulst aan PG, Singapore, 8 januari 1949’. Murray was leading the smuggling network in Manila, see below.

<sup>52</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, ‘Proces verbaal van de bevinding van De Haas, in opdracht van S. van Hulst, Commissaris van Politie den 2<sup>de</sup> klasse, 18 september 1948’.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem.

Browning rifles and more than 400,000 cartridges, with a total value of \$340,000.<sup>54</sup> De Haas also found an order list for more weapons, which Hire presumably planned to deliver on a following run.<sup>55</sup> De Haas called for a Dutch navy ship, and in the evening the arrested were transported to Tanjung Pinang, where they were imprisoned.<sup>56</sup>

### **Airabu's aftermath: the legitimacy of a colonial war fought out in court**

What followed was a very politically sensitive court case that took place from December 1948 to January 1949, against the background of 'Operation Crow', the second military action of the Dutch colonial army against the Indonesian Republicans. Three Americans and two British citizens, all former World War II soldiers, had been arrested by Singaporean and Dutch police in Dutch East Indies territorial waters, inveigled by these police forces to sell arms. The defendants and their lawyers were therefore eager to question the legitimacy of the Dutch-British-Singaporean police operation, as it had deliberately entrapped the suspects.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, these suspects were British and American citizens, some of them war heroes. In light of the recent outbreak of violence in December 1948, the American public opinion was not on the side of the Dutch. This was not likely to change during the Airabu affair. In addition, the defendants' lawyer was indignant about the treatment of the prisoners. For far too long, he complained, the prisoners had not been allowed to communicate with the outside world. In a letter to his parents, preserved in the archives, Hire

---

<sup>54</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Proces verbaal van de bevinding van De Haas, in opdracht van S. van Hulst, Commissaris van Politie den 2<sup>de</sup> klasse, 18 september 1948'; 3,35 million dollars nowadays.

<sup>55</sup> According to this list: 1733 browning rifles, 450 Garrand automatic rifles, 650 automatic carbines, 720 browning automatic machine guns, 150 bazookas (including 6 rockets), 250 hand grenades, and a large stock of ammunition for these weapons. S.A., 'Hire Trial Story of Arms List', *The Singapore Free Press*, 22 January 1949, 1 (in: NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I).

<sup>56</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I: 'Proces verbaal van de bevinding van De Haas'.

<sup>57</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Brief aan het Amerikaans Consulaat, 6 januari 1949'; 186, II, 'Voorlopig onderzoek'; 186, III, various newspaper articles in this bundle.



expressed great dissatisfaction about his treatment by the Dutch authorities, profiling himself as merely a victim of the circumstances.<sup>58</sup>

The American prisoners complained too. Onstott was dissatisfied that the only food they received was rice with some vegetables, which to his opinion was 'barely edible.'<sup>59</sup> The defendants' strategy was to profile the suspects as some sort of tragic heroes, who, committed to the fate of the Republican Indonesians, got carried away by their passion for liberty and democracy. Perhaps the credibility of this argument suffers from the excessive amounts of money the opium and weapons transport had produced, but eventually it worked. The lawyers of the defendants based their appeals on the legitimacy of colonial law during the tumult of decolonization in Asia after World War II. On top of that, unclear boundaries of jurisdiction left considerable room for discussion; the involvement of police forces from different colonies, assisted by their various motherlands raised questions about which law applied; Dutch colonial law, as the alleged crime took place in Dutch territorial waters; Dutch law, as the police forces from Singapore were technically operating under the Dutch consulate; or Singaporean law, as they were arrested under the authority of Singaporean officials. The eventual penalty depended on which laws were applied.

Was smuggling the proper terminology to describe the Airabu case? Estimating the criminality of the act depends entirely on which side one takes. The judge in Tanjung Pinang left no doubt: supplying arms to Indonesian rebels across the territorial borders of the Dutch East Indies without the proper Dutch legal documents was in the eyes of the Netherlands Indies Government, which he represented, a serious crime and a threat to internal and international security.<sup>60</sup> Special laws and international proclamations, designed in the context of earlier colonial wars and global diplomatic developments, strictly stipulated the transportation of arms across the Dutch-Anglo frontier in Southeast Asia, though throughout the twentieth century these laws had proved increasingly hard to enforce.<sup>61</sup> Naturally, the arrest of three American war pilots by Dutch colonial agents

---

<sup>58</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, 'Brief van C. Hire aan diens ouders, 7 februari 1949'.

<sup>59</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 Part III, 'Brief van de Officier van Justitie aan de PG, 15 november 1948'.

<sup>60</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 Part III, 'Brief van de Officier van Justitie aan de PG, 15 november 1948'.

<sup>61</sup> Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*, 269-276, 308-309.

caused quite some diplomatic turmoil. The American consul in Batavia was not very happy to see these pilots depicted as a bunch of licentious adventurers or international bandits. The senator of Oklahoma (the home state of Onstott), interfered and saw Hire clearly as the main culprit; the ‘American youngsters’ were merely tricked, therefore innocent, and to return home as soon as possible.<sup>62</sup> Eventually, all suspects confessed their involvement in the transport of weapons from Manilla to Airabu. However, they denied that it was smuggling, as they were not directly involved in the sale of these weapons to the Republicans. That had been, so they claimed, all Houghton’s responsibility. Moreover, they did not acknowledge the jurisdiction of the court. Eventually, Houghton’s statement was decisive for the conviction of all suspects. The fact that Hire had shouted “Merdeka!” to De Haas was decisive, as it indicated that Hire thought he dealt with, and thus from his perspective deliberately sold weapons to Indonesian revolutionaries.<sup>63</sup> The judge at Tanjung Pinang convicted the pilots to four, three and one-and-a-half year of prison, and Hire to seven years. Immediately, the diplomatic corpses of the UK and the USA started exerting political pressure to get their citizens out of prison. And with success. On 6 September 1949, the American pilots were pardoned and released. Ten days later, the court ruled that there was no legal basis to grant clemency to Hire. However, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November, during the final days of the colony, the Attorney-General saw no point in retaining Hire anymore and relieved him as well.<sup>64</sup>

A happy ending? Not quite. The American government closely followed the case, reading newspapers from Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. The Americans were interested not only because of the American suspects, but also because of the possible involvement of US troops in the Philippines. Furthermore, among the smuggled weapons was American material. This raised serious suspicions on the American base near Manilla, though it was already known that many weapons and other American army items had fallen into the hands of Philippine citizens after the Philippine independence in 1946.<sup>65</sup> But Airabu was the first affair that showed the

---

<sup>62</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 Part IV: ‘Telegram omslag VI, 9 mei 49’.

<sup>63</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, ‘Rapporten over Houghton’, ‘Brief van S. van Hulst aan PG, Singapore, 8 januari 1949’; 186 II, ‘Voorlopig onderzoek’.

<sup>64</sup> NA, PG, 186 IV.

<sup>65</sup> A.W. McCoy, *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines* (Madison, WI 2009) 189-190, 233-234.

large scale of gunrunning from the Philippines to other parts of Southeast Asia. Later on, it appeared that a former American ex-army counterintelligence officer, who was specialized in weapons and drug theft and smuggling, headed the weapons smuggling network. During the trial in Tanjung Pinang, Onstott claimed the organization of this man, named George Murray, was actually the source of the weapons provided at Air Abu.<sup>66</sup> Evidence found at Murray's home suggested that his gang smuggled everything from carbines to light tanks and artillery.<sup>67</sup> He was never held responsible, as a couple of weeks after the Airabu Affair he was murdered. This murder was never resolved, concealing the case even more.<sup>68</sup>

### **Conclusion: the Airabu affair in perspective**

There is a wide body of historiography, both in the Dutch, Indonesian and international academic scene, about the impact of Dutch and Indonesian militarism, guerilla tactics, counter-insurgency and the escalation of violence during the Indonesian war of Independence. Smuggling however, has so far remained at the background, which is not surprising, as it was often hidden from sight in history itself. The Airabu case is known because the smugglers were caught, their cases were published in newspapers and their files put in archives. There may be many cases of smuggling we do not know of, simply because the smugglers were never caught. Furthermore, it raises the

---

<sup>66</sup> S.A., 'De Wapensmokkel-affaire: fel debat voor rechtbank over competentiekwestie, Onstott noemt naam van leverancier van wapens en munitie', *Het Dagblad*, 18 December 1948, 1; 'Wapenleverancier Murray te San Juan vermoord: opheldering in smokkelaffaire van wapens naar Indonesië', *Het Dagblad*, 15 August 1949, 1; S.A., 'Smokkel van wapens naar Indonesië en Malakka', *Het Dagblad*, 23 August 1949, 1; S.A., 'Manilla: internationale basis voor wapensmokkel. Smokkelsyndicaat met vertakkingen tot Zuid-Amerika toe', *Het Dagblad*, 14 September 1949, 1.

<sup>67</sup> It is uncertain what information these files exactly contained, nor was I able to trace them. See: S.A., 'Smokkel van wapens naar Indonesië en Malakka', *Het Dagblad*, 23 August 1949, 1.

<sup>68</sup> NA, PG, inv. nr. 186 I, Noot van S. van Hulst, 'Verzamelde berichten', *De Vrije Pers*, 12 oktober 1949; S.A., 'Manilla: internationale basis voor wapensmokkel', *Het Dagblad*, 14 September 1949; S.A., 'Carol Varga nu verdwenen', *De Locomotief: Samarangsch Handels- en Advertentie-blad*, 26 August 1949, 1; S.A., 'Kwaad', *Nieuwe Courant*, 2 February 1949, 1.

question: when do we speak of smuggling? For the Dutch colonial authorities, every undesired transport of commodity across the colonial territorial borders without the proper licenses was smuggling. Especially transport of opium (legally a state monopoly), gold, weapons, and other sensitive material such as fuel, liquor and valuable items that possibly undermined colonial power, was considered smuggling. By denying the Indonesians access to legally acquire these items, they not only enforced their disbelief in Indonesian independence, but also encouraged smuggling. For the Indonesians, who were unable to buy sufficient weapons on the markets the Dutch had access to, it was rightful trade in their own dominion. Fighting a war requires weapons, and one of the very few ways the Republicans of Indonesia could acquire these was by importing them on unregistered flights flown by allied pilots for whom it was mostly a chance to earn lifetime supplies of money.

An important consequence of this problem may be that the colonial system presented a misleading picture of its own legal nature and mechanics, as no international legal basis was used in the court case.<sup>69</sup> The Dutch colonial legal system, therefore, obviously failed to create a fair legal framework about who was allowed to trade in or possess arms. The Dutch colonial authorities kept 'regarding the Indonesians as foreigners', and here we may find the ultimate source of the problem of smuggling and arms trade.<sup>70</sup>

Smuggling from and to the Riau Archipelago and other islands did not stop. Before and after the Airabu case, we find many short notes in the archives of the Attorney-General and other archives about smuggling. In 1946, a Dutch police inspector investigated the rumors in Singapore about large-scale smuggling of weapons around Singapore in exchange for gold and opium from Java. A number of British officers did not cooperate during this investigation, and later on these were suspected of corruption and actual involvement in the smuggling. In 1948 and 1949 numerous boats, in some cases belonging to the British Royal Navy, carrying all sorts of goods seem to have crossed the Malacca and Karimata Strait, from Sumatra to Singapore and beyond. Occasionally a boat was caught, but usually the smugglers were apparently well able to circumvent the Dutch blockades.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> J.M. van der Kroef, 'On the Writing of Indonesian History', *Pacific Affairs* 31.4 (1958) 352-371: 364.

<sup>70</sup> G. J. Resink, 'Veronachtzaamde uitspraken', *Indonesia* 8 (1955) 1-26: 17.

<sup>71</sup> Many cases are found in: NA, PG, inv nrs. 182-185, 190-191.

The 'Aceh Trading Company' for example, was extraordinarily successful in transporting rubber and opium to Thailand in exchange for weapons.<sup>72</sup> Larger transports, using aircrafts, however, appear more rarely in the archives and may have occurred less frequently. The administrative power of the colonial authorities was simply too limited, and the mandate of the Dutch intelligence and police officers of Singapore was insufficient to put smuggling to a stop. Cooperation with the British-Singaporean authorities was not always as spotless as may be suggested by this case.<sup>73</sup> The weak and porous borders of the archipelago had always been hard to protect. But during the war, it became even harder to the depleted Dutch and their colonial states to counter smuggling. It was simply too extensive, and there was little the Dutch were able to do. In this case a solution was found in deceiving the 'culprits.' Contrary to what some historians claimed, the Dutch colonial authorities were perhaps less powerful as a 'police-state' than they imagined.<sup>74</sup> The means of the police intelligence services were limited, especially during the final war years.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, facts about the functioning of the system were so secretly guarded at the time (and not rarely destroyed) that they remain largely unknown. Moreover, some Dutch army officials were involved in smuggling networks, playing very foul play, often against each other.<sup>76</sup>

The trail of the Airabu smugglers may have been intended by the Dutch Government to set an example against what they regarded bands of international adventurers and gangsters. The Airabu affair also stresses that to some, the war bared meaning beyond simply 'one party fighting the

---

<sup>72</sup> NA, PG, inv nr. 189, 'Smokkel van cultuurgoederen'.

<sup>73</sup> Yong, *The Indonesian Revolution*, 152-5.

<sup>74</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia, c. 1300 to the Present* (London and Basingstoke 1981) 225; H.A. Poeze, 'Political intelligence in the Netherlands Indies' in: R. Cribb ed., *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia. Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies, 1880-1942* (Leiden 1994) 229-246: 242; M. Boembergen, *De geschiedenis van de politie in Nederlands-Indië: uit zorgen angst* (Leiden 2009).

<sup>75</sup> Poeze, 'Political intelligence in the Netherlands Indies', 242; E. Locher-Scholten, 'State Violence and the Police in Colonial Indonesia circa 1920. Exploration of a Theme' in: F. Colombijn and J.Th. Lindblad ed., *Roots of Violence. Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective* (Leiden 2002) 81-104: 100-101.

<sup>76</sup> See the newspaper article of A.L. Hoek, 'Een vuil oorlogje op Bali', *NRC Handelsblad*, 15 November 2014, 24-27, for an illuminating example of army officials involved in corruption, smuggling and sabotage on Bali, and got the Military Police official who was designated to investigate this case sidelined.

other'. To some contrabanders smuggling may have been a tool to 'manage and manipulate the malleable reality of the colonial situation to local ends', to others it was simply an opportunity to make money and perhaps find adventure.<sup>77</sup> It touches upon romanticized depictions of war, larded with exiting details that normally vivify war novels and movies. Such romanticizing may have played a role in the motives of the suspects in the Airabu case.

Finally, the case reveals that during the war the Dutch were eager to enter into international cooperation, actively seeking support for their causes that ranged from catching international criminals to countering Indonesian attempts to acquire, weapons, ammunition, and other tactical equipment. It is interesting to note that the Singaporean police offered its full cooperation. On top of that, the British government sought much less diplomatic confrontation after the conviction of Hire than the Americans did when 'their' pilots were convicted. Do we notice a classic dichotomy between ancient imperialists and anti-colonialists, fighting for liberty? In any sense, trade in products such as narcotics (opium), arms and goods was judged to be illegal particularly in context of colonial law. However, very subtly, the Airabu affair seems to reflect on the legitimacy of Dutch presence in Indonesia, at least during the Indonesian war of Independence, and perhaps even on the legitimacy of colonial law and colonialism itself.

---

<sup>77</sup> Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders*, 372.